

## 'STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY, MANAGEMENT AND THE CORRUPTED WORLD OF SERVICE'

**ABSTRACT:** Lipsky's analysis of the implementation gap in welfare policy in 'Street-level Bureaucracy' focuses on the problem front-line discretion but 'brackets off' the discretion of senior managers. In this paper I draw on a qualitative study to argue that senior managers can also exercise significant discretion and that their discretion can contribute to the conditions of policy confusion and contradiction, and resource inadequacy that characterise 'the corrupted world of service' of front line discretion. In this context front line discretion is may be used by front line staff to bridge the policy implementation gap created by senior managers.

**Keywords:** street-level bureaucracy, discretion, managers, Lipksy, managerialism

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### INTRODUCTION

In the thirty years plus since 'Street-level Bureaucracy' was first published Lipksy's work has established itself as a classic text, such that: '... the bright-eyed, bushytailed reader of it cannot help but come away with a more realistic appreciation of the possibilities for changing the world through policy and government.' (Kosar 2011: 302). However, since the book was originally published there have been significant changes in the organisation of public services, not least the rise of new public management, that raise questions about the continuing relevance of 'Street-level Bureaucracy' to understanding the relationship between policy and front-line practices. Public sector managers have sought to divest themselves of the image of administration and replace this with a commitment to manage in the pursuit of more business-like values. In public welfare services, where there is a strong element of professional provision of service, the increased activity of senior management is often seen as having had a dramatic impact on welfare services, not least through the curtailing of front-line discretion. Street-level practitioners, some commentators have argued, no longer have discretion because managers have created a coherent system of control through the deployment of extensive and effective systems of procedures, budgets and surveillance.

However, the continuing success of 'Street-level Bureaucracy' (Lipksy 1980 & 2010) can in part be ascribed to the prescience of Lipsky's analysis and the robust way in

which he challenges the assumption that modern management can create a new, well-oiled, business-like machine of public policy delivery (Evans 2012). In his analysis of discretion in street-level Bureaucracies he focuses on the continuing (and inevitable) level of discretion front line staff continue to exercise despite management reforms in public services.

A problem, though, with Lipsky's analysis is that it gives insufficient attention to the role of managers as actors with significant discretion in the policy implementation process; or to the extent to which decisions of senior managers may influence both policy implementation directly and the context of discretion encountered by street level bureaucrats.

In this paper I want to look at the role of senior management as a contributing factor to the corrupted world of service (Lipsky 2010: xv) and the conditions that characterises street-level bureaucracies; and consider how managers respond to this environment. In talking about senior managers I'm not only talking about an organisational strata but also the ideas associated with this level of management that managers should be in control of public organisations, and that they should run these organisations according to business principles and business concerns, particularly economic concerns for efficiency and parsimony (Kirkpatrick et. al. 2005). In talking about senior management it's also important to underline the distinction this implies between senior managers (those who work most closely with politicians and make strategic decisions within street-level organisations) and local managers (who are involved in the direct management of street-level

practitioners). The primary reason for this is that at the immediate management level it is particularly difficult to distinguish street-level practitioners from their direct managers, particularly in services that are delivered by professionals. These local managers tend to play a dual role of practitioner and manager, and they often share the same professional background as the staff they manage (Friedson 1994). It is only as one progresses up the management hierarchy in most street-level bureaucracies that the distinction between street-level bureaucrat and manager becomes clear (Evans 2010,2012). I will argue that street-level bureaucracies and the policy processes with which they are associated are in part the result of the policy choices and priorities of senior managers and politicians. Accordingly the difficult conditions that characterizes street-level bureaucracies are just not an external problem that management can solve but also a reflection of managerial concerns with parsimony and promotion of entrepreneurialism, and political concerns with the avoidance of blame and culpability.

## **MANAGERS IN 'STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY'**

Street-level bureaucracies are difficult organisations within which to work, they are characterised by the challenging working conditions they create for workers—conditions of resource shortages and policy confusion (Lipsky 1991). Policy objectives tend to be ambitious, ambiguous, vague or conflicting, and resources are never sufficient to the task at hand. Furthermore, they are organisations that deliver welfare services to the public in in dynamic work situations, where there is a

need to respond to the human dimension of service in terms of: '...complex tasks for which elaboration of rules, guidelines, or instructions cannot circumscribe the alternative' (Lipsky 2010:15).

Managers within street-level bureaucracies employ performance indicators to measure outputs and use eligibility criteria to ration access to services and they are committed to organisational management: 'Managers' roles in this context are associated with worker-management goals directed toward aggregate achievement of the work unit and orientations directed toward minimizing autonomy' (Lipsky 2010:25). These organisations are more managed than bureaucratic. Rather than being clerkly, rule-governed administrative organisations, street-level bureaucracies bear a striking similarity to modern managerialised welfare bureaucracies — resplendent with strategies of control and coordination such as performance and financial management, audit, and proceduralisation (Harris 2003). However, 'Despite the massive mechanisms designed to control and direct their behavior' (Prottas 1978:288)' the street-level perspective recognises that front line workers retain extensive discretion in the sense of the freedom to make decisions in a work role, despite managers' attempts to curtail their freedom.

Lipsky exploration of the role of managers is surprising anodyne. Management, as it has developed over the past thirty years, is fundamentally a claim to act and to decide; it's '...a means of maximizing organizational performance, service and profit through cost-cutting, increased regulation, privatization of services, reengineering and evidence-based management.' (Cunliffe 2009: 18) Lipsky's managers, though,

are rather un-managerial by these measures. They are more reactive, much more diplomatic creatures who: '... typically attempt to honor workers' preferences if they are rewarded by reciprocity in job performance.' (Lipsky 2010:25).

While 'Street-level Bureaucracy' is striking in terms of the examination of the limitation of management tools and techniques in controlling street-level discretion Lipsky's account of the role and motivation of managers seems nostalgic – reflecting a previous age when directors and administrators, in private companies, kept '... the peace; keep the factory running'(Purcell 1991: 34) and in the public sector negotiated policies and procedures with practitioners and coordinate this process in the interest of the organisation (e.g. Straus et al 1963). Lipsky brackets off managers' motives and values in his analysis of discretion within street-level bureaucracies. Managers are presented as the cyphers of official policy, doing their best in difficult circumstances to make policy work — striving to narrow the gap between street-level performance and 'desired policy results' (Lipsky 2010:223). Unlike recalcitrant front-line workers who challenge and distort policy, managers, on Lipsky's account, are paragons of policy implementation virtue: 'Managers are interested in achieving results consistent with agency objectives. Street-level bureaucrats are interested in processing work consistent with their own preferences and only those agency objectives so salient as to backed up by significant sanction.'(Lipsky 2010:18-19) However, characterising managers simply as transmitters of policy ignores what management is about. It has a certain take on how policy should be implemented, what the focus in policy implementation should

be. Modern managers are key organisational actors. They assert and have achieved the right to manage: 'they should determine policy goals and actively seek to implement them' (Kirkpatrick et. al. 2005: 65-6). They have a parsimonious take on their role — to achieve more for less (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Street-level bureaucracy theory needs to incorporate an understanding of the role of managers as discretionary decision agents with their own policy agenda, within its understanding of the policy implementation/making process in public welfare organisations.

## **MANAGING TO MAKE UP POLICY**

Lipsky's critical analysis in 'Street-level Bureaucracy' punctures the pretensions of managers' omnipotence and omniscience continues to resonate. While there have been significant moves by managers to control front line decision-making '...it is far from clear just how far these broader goals were achieved. Whether or not managers in Social Service Departments (and ultimately policy makers) are now better able to control and direct operational-decision making is open to question.' (Kirkpatrick et. al. 2005 114). However, the fact that street-level practitioners continue to have some discretion does not mean that only they have discretion, or that policy outcomes are primarily the results of their actions (Evans 2015). Several early commentators noted the problematic emphasis in 'Street-level Bureaucracy' on front-line discretion and policy outcomes. While these commentators agree that street-level bureaucrats play a role in changing and implementing policy, they also

point out that the response of street-level bureaucrats to their situation—such as rationing contact time—may be a management strategy, as opposed to a worker response (Anon 1981:813). Hasenfeld points out: 'There simply is no evidence to support his [Lipsky's] argument that the service practice in the welfare departs or the school system are more a function of the discretion of lower-level workers than the deliberate policies of the organisational elites...'. This is not to deny the importance of ...'discretion but to suggest that its impact is far more limited than the author [Lipsky] implies' (Hasenfeld 1981:156). Furthermore, the emphasis on the role of street-level bureaucrats to explain policy distortions does not acknowledge the part of managers and policy-makers throughout the organisational hierarchy, who themselves play a role in developing and changing policy, and who often use 'technical experts' on the front-line to provide them with cover when problems arise in the implementation of their own impractical strategic policies (Stone 1983). The significant acceleration in managerial power within public welfare organisations over the past three decades only emphasises the point that the street-level bureaucracy perspective needs to engage with managers as powerful and committed policy actors in its analysis of policy implementation and discretion.

Lipsky, in the final chapter of new edition of 'Street-level Bureaucracy', acknowledges that street-level discretion: '...will be structured by the choices available to the workers as options...provided by the policies' (Lipsky 2010:223). However, the anodyne picture of managers as uncomplicated policy actors in 'Street-level Bureaucracy' continues in the body of the new edition. Managers simply structure sanctions and incentives to implement the policy they are directed



to put into effect. They have to be flexible and adapt policy in order to gain street-level worker compliance. They are the organisational police force striving to enforce policy compliance against the disruptive forces of the resistant, self-servicing and recalcitrant street-level bureaucrats they have to manage (Lipsky 1980&2010 esp. Chpt. 2).

What is striking in Lipsky's account is that managers don't seem to have their own agenda – either personal or professional. But management claims the right to set its own agenda and determine policy goals, is itself an approach that is fundamentally embedded in an economic logic (Kirkpatrick et. al. 2005.) and which emphasises entrepreneurialism in the public sector (Lapsley 2008).

Managers' work, like the work of the street-level bureaucrats they manage, though, is not simply technical; it also entails making policy decisions, setting priorities, interpreting requirements and allocating resources (Harris 2003, Evans 2010 & 2015). In exercising their prerogative to manage, managers allocate resources, and interpret policies and, in this sense, they not only exercise discretion in making policy decisions but also set the context within which subordinate discretion is exercised. In the same way that street-level bureaucrats are the '... street ministers of education, dispute settlement, and health services' (Lipsky 2010:12) we also need to investigate the extent to which managers are also significant policy actors—the smart-suited ministers of education, dispute settlement, and health services.

In the next section I will consider these issues in relation to research I have done looking at discretion within an English social services department—a prime example of a classic street-level bureaucracy.

## **DISCRETION IN A STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY – A CASE STUDY**

The study was designed as a case study of discretion within a street-level bureaucracy. A case studies allows us to explore the complex interaction of actors and factors in a particular setting, but they can also be seen as limited in terms of the general lessons that can be drawn from these particular circumstances. However, this claimed limitation (Stake 1998) can be overplayed. It ignores the important role that case studies can play in the critical examination and development of theory (Walton1992). A case is an example of something more general; where case studies are constructed to reflect theoretical concerns it's possible to draw wider conclusions about the theory from the particular cases (Walton1992).

Lipsky describes the key characteristics of a street-level bureaucracy—the type of organisation to which his theory applies—as a welfare organisation in which overblown policy rhetoric exists alongside chronic understaffing and underfunding (Lipsky 2010:27-28). This study looked at the experience of social workers and their front-line managers across two social work teams — one a mental health team, the other an older people's team — within the same social services organisation. The

conditions, within the organisational context of overblown policy rhetoric and policy imprecision, together with under resourcing of services, (Gomm et al 2000) fit the key conditions associated with street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky 2010). This tension was reflected in an increasingly intensive managerial regime of surveillance and specification of practice. The study authority had been proactive in embracing new public management—and its managers prided themselves on being ahead of the game in introducing a more business-like approach to service provision.

Management reforms within the study authority involved classic strategies in the form of focused resource management, proceduralisation of practice and close supervision of practice, particularly the application of eligibility criteria and decisions about entitlement to services.

The study employed qualitative methods of data gathering: primarily interviews with the ten practitioners and five local managers (all of whom were qualified social workers) across the two teams. The study also included observational and documentary data. Practitioners and managers were interviewed using a schedule that sought to balance a thematic structure with room for participants to express their own perspective and subjective understandings (Flick, 1998). The interview schedule focused on the following themes: the impact of management control techniques—such as procedures and resource control; the nature of the relationship between local managers and practitioners; and the use of discretion at street level. The data analysis has involved iterative process of the critical reading, re-reading and organisation of the data. The analysis aims to develop a perspective which helps

make sense of the data rather than uncover an underlying reality (Dey 2004:91).

## **NOT QUITE MANAGING TO CONTROL**

Commentators in professional literatures, such as that in social work, have been critical of 'Street-level Bureaucracy'. They contend that Lipsky's analysis is no longer relevant: practitioners no longer have discretion (Howe 1991) because managers have created a coherent system of management that is able to control practice through the mechanisms of procedures, budgets and surveillance (Howe 1986, 1991): 'Managers extract whatever uncertainty there is in the process so that their "act" of devising the system of practice, surveillance and resource allocation which determines the work of subordinates remains the major free act in the whole business' (Howe 1986:151).

While it was clear that practitioners felt that management was increasingly intrusive and guidance and surveillance extensive their experience was that they retained a significant degree of discretion in their work. Practitioners and managers in the Mental Health Team felt that they had not been particularly subject to the attention of senior management because it's not a priority for them—'I think that we're often forgotten about'. In contrast, people in the other team—the Older Persons'—were acutely aware of the impact of proactive and intrusive senior management. They felt it had a significant impact on the way in which they did their work with close monitoring of finances, restrictive eligibility criteria (governing

access to services) and a voluminous manual of procedures. However, these factors constrained rather than eliminated discretion. Important sources of discretion identified by Lipsky persisted at local level. The front line practitioners still felt they had to engage with discretion in their work: making sense of conflicting policies, interpreting and applying policies and balancing formal policy statements, resources and the job of work at hand. For instance one practitioner, talking about the service eligibility criteria, which on the face of it look precise and restrictive, pointed out:

...there's still, I think, scope for interpretation...I can't remember all the wording, but I think it's like with anything, it's a substantial amount of care, but what do you mean by that word 'substantial', or 'imminent', a situation that's imminently going to break down?

## COVERT POLICY MAKING

An interesting issue was brought up by several participants which illustrates the role of managers as significant policy actors and the way in which their discretionary decision-making can influence the context of discretion at street level.

At the time of the study adult services in England were provided under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990<sup>1</sup> which sets out the principle that service users have a right to be assessed for a service and that the local authority then has a duty to decide whether to provide a service. Local authorities use eligibility criteria to determine entitlement to services and while they have some discretion to

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<sup>1</sup> The NHS and Community Care Act 1990 has now been replaced by the Care Act 2014

determine their eligibility criteria, once these are determined they are required to apply them consistently (Brayne and Carr 2013).

In the case study a number of interviewees told me that over the preceding year senior managers had told them to ignore the official eligibility criteria ('the matrix') and instead apply tighter and narrower criteria to future requests for service. One interviewee explained that:

When the decision was made that we would be providing services for matrix 1 and 2 clients, that wasn't supported by a policy, like a written document to support that. It was a policy decision that was agreed with local councillors. So we had a verbal directive. We had no written statement to support that, which made the job ... of having to share that information with clients and support people with that information—it made it much harder, because I think people could give different accounts of that policy.

Practitioners were concerned about this. They objected to the authority's failure to acknowledge its tighter criteria publicly, and its perceived use of practitioners to mask a political problem with funding. They were also concerned because of their position vis-à-vis service users who met the formal criteria but were below the line set by the informal criteria. The practitioners as a group wrote to senior managers to register their disquiet and demand that the authority formally acknowledge the tighter criteria it was seeking to operate. The authority, as it is required by law (Brayne and Carr 2013), withdrew its request to front line staff and eventually formally published new, tighter criteria and all service users were reassessed against it.

This example illustrates significant issues about the nature of management and the policy implementation process within street-level bureaucracies.

Senior managers here were clearly making policy and setting a context for subordinate discretion. They were deciding (together with local politicians) on the nature of organisational policy in a significant sense. They were using their right to manage to make policy choices. They could have asked politicians for more resources to ensure official eligibility levels could be honoured, or have asked for a review and revision of eligibility criteria to bring services in line with legal requirements, but they did neither. Rather, they chose to push down an informal instruction to narrow the eligibility criteria so that they were more restrictive than the official statement of entitlement – an approach that ran against national policy guidelines and was open to legal challenge.

## ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCRETION

The practitioners' responses to management is also instructive. Acting together, they referred back to the informal 'instruction' to senior managers, citing the official guidelines and national policy. Here, practitioners at street level were choosing to use national policy to resist its local interpretation. This also raises interesting questions about how discretion is being used. According to Lipsky managers do their best to keep street level bureaucrats in line with policy. This example is the

mirror image: here practitioners were challenging manager's interpretation of policy to bring it back in line with national policy (and the law).

This was a particularly dramatic example but it was also emblematic of what seemed to be a general strategy of senior management in handling the tension between policy and resources by encouraging street level workers to adopt an entrepreneurial attitude to policy — taking risks in order to achieve the desired outcome.

A pervasive example of this entrepreneurial expectation was the attitude encouraged by senior managers towards the detailed and extensive policies and procedures (that they had developed to govern and guide practice). Several interviewees made the point that senior managers were both prescribing policies 'over the top on the side of the worthiness and including everything under the sun and every consideration', but these managers also realised that the policies were impractical and so gave covert permission (in terms of expectations and 'nods and winks') to teams to not only to be flexible but also to ignore policy and procedures. There was also a top-down (informal) policy of flexible compliance within the authority — prescribing procedural excellence and exactness while expecting and encouraging of procedural pragmatism.

... there are so many rules and procedures and everything else that ... you know, no-one's got the memory of an elephant, so everybody's got a whole load that they can't remember. So there's a sort of ignoring of certain things ... And in a sense I think that's quite tolerated.



The key skill for front-line staff was knowing which policies were negotiable and which policies were not. There were 'must-do' policies and these related to finance and anything that might affect external perception of performance:

... the must-do things is [*sic*] very much centred round money. Anything that causes a problem around money is a definite no-no! Getting expenditure properly authorised and things like that. Making proper orders and so on. Must-dos will be around doing assessments in a fairly recognisable sort of format, a fairly acceptable way of doing it

The reaction amongst front-line staff to this environment was mixed — local managers and local practitioners both divided equally into two groups. One group was critical of the assumption that one should adopt an entrepreneurial approach towards 'the rules of the game' — they felt that there should not be so many rules as to exclude discretion but where there were rules these should be respected—and they were critical of senior managers who ignored the rules to stave off possible complaints, and cut losses, rather than apply policy consistently:

'I like the idea of a level playing field... we're carrying out assessments and trying to work towards criteria, and then seeing that maybe somebody's been unhappy with that and they've then maybe gone through the complaints procedure and maybe contacted a manager direct, and then ... the rules are bent, you know'.

The other group was happier to adapt 'the rules of the game' but their approach was grounded in their professional commitments rather than managerial concerns: '...if I can justify it to myself and it is in the client's best interest, that's how I justify it...and deciding for myself that actually this isn't good for this client. I wouldn't discuss it with anybody. It would be my own judgement.'

These two attitudes to the entrepreneurial discretionary context related to another aspect of entrepreneurialism, that flexibility comes at a price in terms of the potential for blame. One practitioner, for instance, voiced concerns about the way risk is understood and used in local policies: '... there is a perception that if something does go wrong there's some sort of culpability there ... although you're sharing it with your line manager'.

One aspect of this explains why the challenge to the senior managers' attempt to introduce an unofficial narrow eligibility criteria was successful—it was a statutory requirement that no one on the front line wanted to contravene. However, while being flexible with policies and procedures had advantages in particular circumstances there was also concern that this undermined the ability of the front-line managers and practitioners to challenge senior managers' entrepreneurialism.

In the older persons team, for instance, interviewees told me about a policy they had to work with which, in effect, created a waiting list from service provision (and reducing spending on older persons services). Service users who met the eligibility criteria did not receive the service straight away but had to wait until senior managers said they could have the resources. These resources were not released until twice the equivalent resource had been saved—only after two residential beds have been vacated could one bed be freed up for admission: the 'two out, one in' policy.

Local managers and practitioners were highly critical of this policy; they felt it might be liable to legal challenge but they didn't feel able to challenge because they were fearful of criticism and blame falling on them because their practice had been compromised by the short cuts they may have employed in their work to get the work done, or to make procedures more responsive to their own values and to the needs of services users:

We've had this ... confirmed again by the solicitors this week ... if somebody ultimately does go to a judicial review about it [the authority] will almost certainly lose the case...but we want to be sure that it's a case where we haven't compounded errors with other things ... you want to be sure that the policy issue isn't going to get lost in a whole load of stuff about someone didn't do this, or they didn't fill in that form properly.

This concern about blame permeates public service organisations. Hood et al. (2000) argue that organisational leaders are not only concerned with running the organisation, but also with managing their exposure to blame when things go wrong. They identify a range of strategies used by organisational elites to manage these risks. Two are particularly interesting here. One is proceduralisation, which involves the increasingly detailed specification of procedures and guidelines, setting out the right way to do things, so that when something goes wrong the organisation can point to the procedures as a defence against criticism. The other is 'service abandonment'. The risk of proceduralisation, for the organisation, is that it implies an acceptance of responsibility. In many situations this is unavoidable, but in others the organisation can reduce its exposure to blame by abandoning its responsibility for a service area. At its most extreme, service abandonment involves withdrawing from providing a service, but more often it can mean not '...issuing advice or information for fear of blame, legal liability or other adverse risks' (ibid.: 166).

What emerges from these examples, and the case study more generally, are illustrations of the ways in which proceduralism and professional discretion can be employed to manage organisational risk; and how senior managers can deploy entrepreneurialism to both try to achieve the goals of more for less and to deflect potential blame. In concrete terms, the entrepreneurial emphasis was on encouraging local discretion to cut corners and get things done with least fuss; but this can also be seen as a strategy of cover for senior management—they cannot be held to account for policy deviation, they have set out their commitments in published policy, deviations must be down to individual bad practice at the front line. Here, we can perhaps see blame-shift as a significant dimension in the ecology of discretion. This is a strategy described by Wells (1997) where front line staff are put in the position of managing individual demands for resources from service users, thus 'distancing management and policy makers from the reality of the "felt" experience of policy, which is ultimately left to practitioners to interpret' (ibid:340). In this case study the process of blame-shifting also seems to be a strategy in which practitioners are faced with vague and imprecise criteria and regulations, which distance senior officers and politicians from difficult decisions.

## **Discussion**

In this paper my particular concern has been the discretion of senior managers and its impact on policy implementation from the perspective of front-line staff, and through this, to consider Lipsky's account of the role of managers in Street-level

Bureaucracy. Lipsky 'brackets off' the discretion of senior managers in his discussion of the 'implementation gap' in public welfare organisations. I argue that understanding the discretion of managers is as important as understanding front-line discretion and that this is so not just because senior managers are significant policy actors but also because their choices and decisions contribute in a significant way to the context within which front-line discretion is exercised.

Lipsky analysis of discretion in Street-level Bureaucracy is interesting. Front line staff have 'discretion' but 'discretion' is not a term he associates with senior managers. However if we think about discretion as: 'the freedom to make decisions in a work role.' (Smith 1981:47) the case study illustrates the fact that discretion permeates organisations, including at senior management level. It is not simply located at the end of the chain of implementation but at points all along it.

However, in recognising managers' discretion our attention is drawn to another point: how then do they use their discretion? Here, we can perhaps understand why Lipsky doesn't consider senior managers' discretion; they are not seen as a problem because it is assumed that their use of discretion shows a fundamental commitment to policy. For Lipsky senior managers are simply concerned with reducing the gap between performance on the front line and 'desired policy results' (Lipsky 2010 p.223). This is in contrast to front line staff, who, he acknowledges, may find their work fulfilling and rewarding, but who abandon their ideals in practice and are primarily motivated by venal concerns and self-interest, developing work routines to make their lives easier and acting in manipulative and controlling ways towards

clients (Lipsky 2010: 86 & 202). However, we have to ask whether or not these sweeping assumptions about two different occupational groups — managers and front line staff — are fair. Certainly in the case study reported here there were examples of managers circumventing formal policy and issuing verbal instructions quite contrary to formal policy. There are two important points here. First, that the behaviour of some senior managers reflects self interested and venal concerns it is not to say that this is always the case. To do so would be as misguided as seeing the motives of front line staff in the same way. It's likely that staff exercising discretion at whatever level of the organisation will be guided by a range of motives that we should be careful not to assume and to caricature but to understand and explore (Evans 2014 & 2015).

Second, the evidence suggests then that we can't assume that management concerns are synonymous with 'desired policy goals' – unless we elide managers' desires with those of policy makers. However, evidence from business, identifying building tension between the interests of senior executives and shareholders (Colvin 2001), and from public service, where senior civil servants challenge the idea that their role is simply to follow the policy instructions of their political masters (Stratton 2014), points to the need to recognise that the interests of senior staff are not necessarily the same as those of their institutional masters.

In analysing the process of policy implementation we should not simply look at the discretion of front line staff to understand the resulting policy: the discretion of senior managers is also important. In seeing managers as discretionary actors in the

policy implementation process –potentially as active, at least, as street-level bureaucrats—raises another point: how do the discretionary decisions and actions affect the context and environment within which their subordinates have to act: what is the impact of their discretion on people down the policy line?

Lipsky talks about conditions of work of street-level bureaucrats as 'the corrupted worlds of service' (ibid. xv). He talks of: 'The ambiguity and unclarity of goals and the unavailability of appropriate performance measures in street-level bureaucracies' (2010: 40). In the case study the corrupted world of service wasn't simply 'out there'; it was, in part, created by the decisions and choices made by senior managers within the organisation. And it was more than simply the context of choices Lipsky talks about. In the case study the running together of formal and informal policy created dilemmas and challenges in terms of which formal policies were must-dos and which were more open to negotiation. And this linked to senior managers' expectations of front line-practitioners, in that they were expected to be entrepreneurial in their use of discretion to negotiate this tension. Staff in the case study understood organisationally that to make services work they had to cut corners, and that senior managers would turn a blind eye to them bending or ignoring rules to do this. However, this entrepreneurship was not only about taking short cuts to get the work done in difficult circumstances, it was also about taking risks and hazarding moral luck (Williams 1981) — if things go wrong, however well intentioned or beyond your control, you potentially expose yourself to blame.

The case study helps us to understand the context within which front line staff have

to make choices and choose whether or not to use discretion. In the case study front-line staff faced not only the often uncomfortable choices about whether or not to follow policy, but also whether the (informal) policy they were being asked to implement was itself in line with (formal) policy and how to respond to any mismatch between the two. And the choice was not only how to use discretion but also whether or not to refuse to use it – as was the case where the practitioners refused to implement informal eligibility criteria when asked to by senior managers. In a sense here these practitioners could be seen as exercising their discretion as judgement: refusing to carry out organisational instructions that they understood to be contrary to the legal requirement to apply published eligibility criteria. For Lipksy this could be seen as an example, once again of their venality – they were refusing to make the best of the discretion they had available to them to make the policy work. However, an alternative interpretation can be found in Kadish and Kadish's (2010) idea of the discretion to disobey. Rather than expect compliance from public officials, their disobedience can be seen as a corrective to misguided orders or challenges when instructions run against the underlying purpose of policy. Discretion here can be seen as a correcting the distortion of policy by senior management. Interestingly, this point has becoming increasingly pertinent in the wake of the Francis Report on deaths in an NHS hospital in the English midlands ('mid Staffs'), where concern was expressed about compliance of front-line staff with instructions from senior management, which were felt to be contrary to good patient care (Francis 2013).



Senior Managers, as well as front line workers, are significant actors with discretion in their own right within street-level bureaucracies. Senior managers can't simply be understood as perfect policy servants in their role as policy implementers; their motives and concerns need to be acknowledged to understand the impact and role of their discretion on policy and its implementation. A case study can extend our understanding of the strengths and limitations of, and develop a more nuanced approach to, theory (Burawoy 1991, Walton 1992), and these insights can then be extended to other cases that fit the basic conditions assumed in the analysis (Goom et al. 2000). In this study I have sought to extend our understanding of the structuring of discretion in street-level bureaucracies — the basic characteristics of which are policy uncertainty and resource and policy mismatch. The findings of this study suggest that we need to look at discretion within street-level bureaucracies in a more rounded way and with a more critical eye. Recognising that discretion exists at street level should not exclude consideration of discretion by managers, or the context within which street-level discretion is exercised, which is structured by a range of factors, including managerial decisions.

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